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SUBJECT: TRIP REPORT - MIDDLE GUINEA VIEWS ON ELECTIONS AND
THE GENERAL POLITICAL/ECONOMIC SITUATION

SUMMARY

¶1. A four-day journey into Middle Guinea, home to approximately four million Guineans, revealed that this part of the country is generally willing to wait for elections in order to allow sufficient time to prepare the population and guarantee transparency. People were more concerned about improving basic economic condition, which they saw as a more pressing need. Despite assurances that the government, political parties and civil society are working well together, some divisions were apparent, notably between the ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP) and the opposition political parties.

WATERSHED OF WEST AFRICA

¶2. (U) During the week of October 15, poloff traveled to the regional capitals of Mamou and Labe in Middle Guinea to meet with recently appointed government officials and representatives from political parties, civil society and unions. More than 85% of Middle Guinea, approximately four million inhabitants are from the Peuhl ethnic group. Middle Guinea is considered a significant watershed as it is home to the sources of two of West Africa, major river systems as well as two hydroelectric dams supplying power to both Lower and Middle Guinea. The region, economy is largely agricultural and dominated by small family farms. The regional capitals serve as economic hubs with approximately 50% of commercial activity generated by small-scale merchants selling goods and services.

¶3. (SBU) Meetings with government officials included:
- Elhadj Safioulaye Bah, Prefect of Mamou
- Bah Mamadou Saliou, Governor of Mamou
- Elhadj Ibrahima Bah, Prefect of Labe
- Elhadj Ibrahima Sory Diabate, Governor of Labe
- Elhadj Amadou Thiam, Mayor of Labe

Other meetings included teachers, youth associations, union representatives, political party representatives, and government officials responsible for liaising with civil society. Poloff also did press interviews with local printed press and national radio and television representatives in Labe.

RECONCILIATION AND COOPERATION

¶4. (SBU) In reference to the significant political unrest and destruction of public property that took place in Middle

Guinea during the January/February strike, both government officials and other contacts were eager to assure poloff that peace has been restored and opposing groups have reconciled. The governor of Mamou emphasized that development cannot progress without peace in the country while the prefect of Mamou said that the population sincerely regrets the damage inflicted on government buildings and other infrastructure. Political parties and union representatives confirmed that there is a high degree of cooperation amongst themselves and with the government as they discuss the political situation, elections, and the path forward.

WE ARE WILLING TO WAIT FOR ELECTIONS

15. (SBU) There was a general consensus among most contacts, both government and civilian alike, that no one is worried about delayed legislative elections. The real issue here is not the elections,, the Governor of Mamou said, but the underlying economic conditions., He added that people want elections, but they have to be convinced that they will be transparent and are therefore willing to wait for the appropriate mechanisms to be put into place in order to ensure that transparency. Most contacts agreed that the government should focus on immediate economic needs and take the time it needs to guarantee free and fair elections.

GOVERNMENT NEUTRALITY IS CRITICAL

16. (SBU) Government and civilian contacts alike emphasized that it is critical that the government administration appear neutral for the elections. Some were doubtful as to whether

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the current administration could achieve that neutrality, pointing to the fact that only a handful of key government officials have actually changed while the rest, especially the government bureaucrats at the regional and local levels, remain the same. A number expressed concern that these same government officials, who will largely be responsible for carrying out elections at the polling stations, are long-time supporters of the ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP).

POPULATION NOT PREPARED FOR ELECTIONS

17. (SBU) The governors and prefects of Mamou and Labe said that Guinea lacks the democratic mentality necessary to participate in effective elections. This comment was echoed by a number of civil society representatives who said that the average citizen is not prepared to vote. A group of teachers told poloff people don,t really know the difference between presidential and legislative elections, or a referendum., In addition, contacts pointed to the legacies of past elections that must be overcome in order to ensure transparent democratic participation. They noted that many people may not understand that the results of these elections, unlike those of the past, are not pre-determined. In addition, many reportedly abstained from voting in previous elections for fear of being simultaneously registered to pay income taxes.

18. (SBU) Although political parties have traditionally been responsible for educating voters before elections, several contacts suggested that civil society should take the lead this time around in order to avoid partisanship. Political party representatives were less than enthusiastic about this suggestion although they welcomed cooperative efforts with civil society colleagues.

PEOPLE LIKELY TO VOTE BASED ON ETHNICITY

¶9. (SBU) There was a general consensus among government and civilian contacts alike that people in Middle Guinea are likely to vote based on ethnicity. The prefect of Mamou commented that since the parties do not have any clear platform or program, people will likely vote what they are familiar with. Since most of the parties are organized according to ethnic background, contacts felt that the population would divide itself accordingly.

WE NEED TO CHANGE OUR MENTALITY

¶10. (SBU) Government officials also discussed the need for a mentality shift within the government. The prefect of Mamou said when we talk about change, we are talking about changing our mentality., He added that there is a new dynamism and solidarity among people, even at the village level. It was the poor comportment of political and judicial officials that gave birth to the revolt,, he said, adding that people will no longer tolerate poor governance. The Labe governor said that government officials need to adjust. They simply don,t know how to govern and need training in order to implement better practices., However, the Labe governor also felt that it was not necessary to change all former government officials and likened the government system to a train) We have a new engine in place, the rest will follow,, he said.

¶11. (SBU) The prefect of Mamou, Elhadj Bah, suggested that the current political set-up may be flawed. He said that most political parties represent very small groups and really only function as long as their founder is involved and financing activities. In addition, no parties have a clear program or agenda other than winning elections. Bah added that this is one reason the unions have taken on a more political role. The unions are supposed to defend workers,, he said, but instead are actively involved in politics. However, the unions, political role is impeded by the fact that only political parties can participate in elections, according to Guinean law.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) Although contacts were eager to emphasize the degree of cooperation and communication between political parties, civil society and the government, divisions were

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apparent. The Mayor of Labe joined the meeting of political parties as the representative from the PUP. He was initially hesitant to attend and then once there, contributed little to the discussion. Every time he attempted to speak up, he was quickly overtaken by one of his opposition colleagues. When poloff intervened to give him an opportunity to speak, opposition members joked that the PUP is dead., In Mamou, the PUP representative said he would come, but then did not show up. His opposition colleagues spoke even more harshly than those in Labe and said that they no longer need to consider the PUP because they no longer hold the power. Poloff encouraged parties to continue to work together and emphasized that a strong democracy provides for participation from all elements of society. END COMMENT
BROKENSHIRE